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Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. Random House, 2007, 551 pages, $27.95.

More than a century ago, Bakunin criticized the notion that one could transform the state into a democratic institution by replacing the present officials with workers as utterly Utopian.

Yes, it may perhaps consist of former workmen, but as soon as they become representatives or rulers of people they cease to be workers and view all ordinary workers from the eminence of state: they will then no longer represent the people, but only themselves and their pretensions to govern the people. Anyone who doubts this does not understand human nature. (*State and Anarchy*, 1873)

Karl Marx dismissed this observation with a curt "no more than does a manufacturer today cease to be a capitalist on becoming a town councillor."[1]

[1] I take this from *Anarchism & Anarcho-Syndicalism: Selected Writings by Marx, Engels and Lenin*. International Publishers, 1972. Gathering together what

Some years ago, a Trotskyist admitted to me that while he thought that Marx's argument had the stronger logic (I am not sure why), in practice history had proven Bakunin correct.

In recent years we can see that, at least to some extent, the opposite is also true. As United States president Jimmy Carter launched a deregulatory revolution that gave a free hand to speculators in the energy, telecommunications, transport and other industries, creating enormous fortunes for a few while leading to skyrocketing rates for many. He invoked the infamous Taft-Hartley Act on striking miners and attacked the air traffic controllers with such venom that their union made the fateful decision to endorse Ronald Reagan as the labor-friendlier candidate. Carter dramatically ramped up the Cold War. He was, in short, the most conservative, anti-labor president the country had seen since Herbert Hoover. Today, stripped of his power, he swings a hammer building houses for poor people, and has written a book reportedly (1 have not yet read it) challenging decades of U.S. policy (including his own) to trample underfoot the lives and rights of the Palestinian people.

Seven years ago, I was among those marching through the streets of Los Angeles chanting "Al Gore, corporate whore." And with good reason, based on his voting record, his investment portfolio, and his financial backers. Today, Gore travels the world speaking—in a way he never dared when he still aspired to the presidency—of the dangers of global warming. Hardly a radical, and still living a life of luxury off the backs of wage slaves around the world, he is nonetheless leading many to ask serious questions about the unsustainable nature of capitalist society (though he would never frame the issue in such terms) that those in power would rather ignore.

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we must assume are the most telling critiques available by the leading lights of the Marxist tradition, this volume performs invaluable service by illustrating just how weak that critique is.

The opposite, too, holds true. Before he entered politics, John Kerry condemned the U.S. military's brutality in Vietnam with a candor that has haunted his political career ever since. As a senator with presidential aspirations, he voted to invade Iraq knowing full well that the pretexts for the invasion were false (he denies this, but anyone who cared to know knew). And the ranks of the business unions are filled with "socialists" who started out hoping to help dump the bosses off our backs, but who, once entrenched in the union bureaucracy, learned to accommodate themselves to contractualism, the Democratic Party, and the lifestyle and prerogatives of a person of power.

The Lucifer Effect is social psychologist Philip Zimbardo's synthesis of an academic career spent studying human behavior, and in particular the sometimes unspeakable things people will do when placed in the wrong social situation. Zimbardo is best known as the creator of the 1971 Stanford prison experiment, in which a group of college student volunteers prescreened to be normal was divided into "guards" and "inmates" and placed in an improvised prison for two weeks. Within days, these ordinary students were transformed into sadistic guards and emotionally broken prisoners. Some had to be released out of concern for their psychological health, and within a week Zimbardo concluded—after being confronted by his future wife, who was appalled at what she saw when she visited the study for the first time—that the study must stop. (Details of the prison study, including a slide show documenting its progress and Zimbardo's thoughts on how people might build up their mental resistance to authoritarian situations, can be found at http://www.lucifereffect.com/ .)

The book opens with a discussion of the psychology of evil, followed by a lengthy discussion of the prison study, including an entire chapter reflecting on its ethical dimensions. The next couple of chapters review other psychological research in the area, which reached similar conclusions. Zimbardo then discusses the abuse and torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, arguing that it is

authorities who set up that institution and turned a blind eye to the horrors being perpetrated there who are responsible, not the individual guards who thus far have been the only ones (aside, of course, from the Iraqi victims) to pay the price. Finally, Zimbardo offers his thoughts on how individuals can strengthen their individual capacity to resist situations that encourage evil and discusses a number of individuals who have done just that—not simply refusing to go along with the brutality unfolding around them, but actively resisting it.

Zimbardo outlines two common explanations of evil (which he defines as behavior that harms, demeans, dehumanizes or destroys innocent others, or which uses one's authority or power to encourage or permit others to do so), one based on internal, more or less fixed, character traits, and a contrasting view that looks to situational or systemic explanations. We customarily look to people's inherent personal qualities to explain why some people act heroically, and others viciously. Modern psychology shares this predisposition, as does the criminal justice system. Zimbardo argues that it makes at least as much sense to look to external factors—offering the analogy of a physician, who looks for the cause of a disease within the affected person, and attempts to cure it there, and a public health model that looks to the external environment to uncover the conditions which breed illness, such as pollutants in the air we breathe or bacteria in the water we drink. In the short term, many lives have been saved by individual treatment, but over the long haul improved sanitation and other public health measures have done far more both to save lives, and to improve their quality.

Human beings, Zimbardo argues, have the capacity both for compassion and evil. While there is much individual variance, the situational environment is a key factor in determining what happens in any given situation. The Stanford prison experiment was constructed to test this theory. By randomly assigning college students to the roles of guard and prisoner, Zimbardo was able to largely rule out individual predisposition. To be sure, some guards

uals; rather, we must organize to bring an end to the conditions that breed such depravity, and to abolish the institutions through which they can inflict that depravity on the rest of us.

be inhumane. No one inclined to build and operate prisons will design one half so humane as the one Zimbardo built in the basement of the Stanford psychology building—and that prison quickly did harm to all who stepped foot in it, no matter which side of the bars they were on.

No, such authoritarian structures can not be made humane. As Bakunin noted, "men do not create situations; it is situations that create men." "Neither to [scientists] nor to anyone else should be given the power to govern, for … those invested with such power necessarily become oppressors and exploiters of society."[2]

The logical conclusion of Zimbardo's life work, though it is one he refuses to recognize, is that we must abolish authoritarian institutions such as the prison, the job, and of course the state, as they create situations which must inevitably bring out the worst even in people intending to do good. This book is not particularly well written, and it is far too inclined to accept things at face value. But despite its limitations, it offers compelling evidence that the anarchists have been right all along; that the source of authoritarianism lies in institutions, not men, and we must dismantle the structures of oppression if we are ever to be free.

Which is not to say that individuals can or should be absolved of responsibility for their actions. Thirty years or so back, while we were awaiting our turn in court, my attorney recalled the closing argument he had made to a jury in an earlier case. The prosecuting attorney, he said, was a man who, given a wide range of alternatives, had chosen to make a living putting people in cages. Such a person was contemptible, devoid of human compassion, and his arguments should be considered in that light.

I find the argument compelling, even if the jury did not. But there is no shortage of people willing to act as exploiters, oppressors and thugs. They can not effectively be dealt with as individ-

[2] G.P Maximoff, compiler, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*. Free Press, 1953. pp. 216, 80.

became as brutal as the rules permitted, while others just did as they were told and even extended small kindnesses to the prisoners. But,

"The power of this situation ran swiftly and deeply through most of those on this exploratory ship of human nature. Only a few were able to resist the situational temptations to yield to power and dominance while maintaining some semblance of morality and decency." (173)

And even those few did not intervene to challenge the abuse they did not participate in. Similarly, a few prisoners refused to conform to the social role to which they had been assigned, although most quickly surrendered to the demands placed upon them and assumed the role of victim.

In reflecting on the experiment, Zimbardo stresses the need to look beyond the situational contexts in which people act and react to examine the underlying systems that support and sustain them. Such systems are typically buttressed not simply by institutions of repression, but also by ideologies that identify others as enemies, or celebrate deference to authority, or place such high priority on certain overriding objectives that other concerns seem irrelevant. In another famous experiment Zimbardo discusses, where subjects were led to believe they were administering electric shocks to people so powerful that they might well kill them, several subjects voiced their concern to the researcher. But when the authority figure insisted that they continue, and assured them that he would assume responsibility, two out of three continued to escalate the voltage to the maximum level despite increasingly desperate pleas over the loudspeaker to stop—followed by silence presumably caused by unconsciousness. Zimbardo speculates that this result is a combination of the subjects' deference to authority figures and the unfamiliarity of the situation. The easiest way out of this unpleasant task, for most, was to continue to the bitter end. Many people just found it too difficult to confront the researcher and refuse to go along. But resistance skyrocketed if subjects were introduced to

the victim, and so had some sense of them as a person, or could see someone else refuse to go along, and so had a model of resistance to emulate.

Similar results have been found in many studies around the world. Indeed, in many circumstances people will follow a preordained situational script even when it is clearly inappropriate. In one study, eight researchers admitted to a mental hospital with a diagnosis of schizophrenia found it very difficult to get out. They behaved normally at all times, asked to be released, and ultimately after several weeks had to turn to colleagues and lawyers for help. Even then, the assumption that anyone in the hospital must be mentally ill was so strong that, when compelled to release the subjects, the staff wrote on their hospital charts the same final evaluation: "Patient exhibits schizophrenia in remission." (322)

A century of studies by social psychologists points to the powerful role of institutions and social context in shaping behavior, both for good and ill. But the news is not all bad. People who are asked to help someone they do not know will usually do so, people who see others behaving altruistically are more likely to join in, people who have participated in collective action or charitable giving are more likely to continue to do so, and indeed to step up the level of their activity. If we thrust people into situations of brutality and oppression, they will respond accordingly; if we create situations that invite human solidarity, we are likely to find it.

So Bakunin's understanding of human nature has been confirmed by a century of psychological research. Unlike Marxism, it has not only stood the test of time—it has been scientifically verified. However, Zimbardo pulls back from the implications of his research. If, as his research demonstrates, the experience of throwing some people into prison as guards and others as prisoners dehumanizes both, can the solution be to make better prisons? After all, his simulated prison was, by the standards of prisons around the world, quite a benign place. Physical brutality against the prisoners was strictly forbidden. Both prisoners and guards were well

educated and healthy. The prisoners knew the experience would end just two weeks after it began. They had the right to leave any time the experience became intolerable, and while the prisoners seem to have forgotten that fact, those whose emotional or psychological state collapsed were immediately released and referred to counseling.

It would be difficult to imagine a less oppressive prison. And yet, prisoners began to break under the strain within 36 hours. Clearly, there is something fundamental to the prison experience itself which is incompatible with human dignity, which violates the human spirit.

And yet Zimbardo responds to the Abu Ghraib abuse in part by pointing to the myriad of officials in charge who created the policies and the situation that bred that abuse, and who did nothing to curb it. These officials have suffered no consequences beyond a bit of public criticism even as a number of guards-some of whom had long histories of abuse, but others of whom had been model soldiers before arriving at Abu Ghraib—have been imprisoned for months or years, stripped of rank and pensions, and will ultimately be discharged.

Zimbardo is appalled, and so calls for better policies (pointing to a colleague who is working with the government to reform the prison) and tighter systems of accountability. But if we are to take his model of human behavior seriously, then the persons in charge of this prison (all soldiers, trained in the ways of killing and control) will not act as the humanitarian prisoncrats he imagines. Were some general or other official to become too concerned with the welfare of the inmates, officially defined as the enemy, he or she would quickly be removed and probably drummed out of the army, much as was the helicopter pilot who intervened in the final stages of the My Lai massacre to save the handful who still lived. The prison complex's structure itself, conceived and built as a place of torture, militates against humane treatment. And more importantly, the fundamental concept of prisons ensures that they will